



New Haven School Change

NEW HAVEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Christopher Columbus Family Academy

255 Blatchley Avenue, New Haven, Connecticut (203) 691-2500

Dr. Abie Lane Benitez, Principal

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TESTIMONY ON SENATE BILL NO. 476, AN ACT CONCERNING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Good day, Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Dr. Abie Benitez and I am the principal of Columbus Family Academy, a dual language Pre-K-8 New Haven public school.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of SB 476. For the past 30 years I have been working with students in urban sectors who encounter barriers with language and as an educator it has been my charge to provide for my students the tools they need to succeed in school and in life. Research has shown that English language learners need between 5-10 years to succeed in school given the appropriate instruction.

It is my professional opinion that with the knowledge and experience that we have now about academic language acquisition, we can certainly ensure that longer time in bilingual programs will provide a solid academic background to our students. A student learning new concepts in depth requires real understanding. Teaching students in their native language can improve the depth of knowledge and, once a concept is learned, all the English vocabulary they are learning will help them implement what they learn in either language. This will allow for students to join the mainstream students with a set of strong skills, permitting the closing of the achievement gap. Dual language programs when implemented with fidelity have proven that bilingualism is a plus, not a hindrance, to students and to society.

We are part of a wonderful state where students could participate in quality higher education, but how could they if they are not given the time they need to mature as learners? An effective program that provides native language and English instruction will promote the development of profound thinkers who will be able to communicate in two languages. Moreover, they will be stronger thinkers and English speakers, with a stronger academic background that is profound and solid. Therefore, I ask why we put a limit of time for students to exit programs if the research shows that the length of time for readiness varies. Thirty months are not enough: please give our students at least the minimum five years.

Finances are important in this decision and teaching staff too. Finances must be considered with a wide view, how the cost of a quality education can enhance society. If students need time, teachers who come to provide effective instruction in the native language need time. Some teachers coming from another country need at least five years to pass all tests and complete the state requirements for certification. In this great state of ours where opportunities abound we need these teachers and they need the time to work while completing their requirements. We have a population of graduates and certified teachers from other states who only have one year to complete all requirements, reciprocity should be open without restriction if their certification process requires a measurement of expertise. Let us provide our students with certified personnel who can teach them in their language.

Thank you.